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ABM Foes See Laird Weakening

Two leading members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who oppose an antiballistic missile system say that new testimony by Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird indicates less need for the ABM than originally believed.

But Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., committee chairman, said it is too soon to tell whether the new development might peril the ABM's chances. "I'm no prophet," Fulbright said.

Sen. Albert Gore, D-Tenn., who heads the Senate unit's disarmament subcommittee, said, however, he thought Laird's new testimony may have undercut "the whole justification" for deployment of an ABM system.

At issue during a four-hour, closed-door session between Laird and the full committee yesterday was the basis for an earlier statement by the defense secretary that the Soviet Union is working toward a nuclear first-strike capability.

Central Issue

Laird made the statement on March 21 before the Senate disarmament subcommittee. The statement—and Laird's basis for making it—became a central issue in the burgeoning arguments for and against the ABM.

In his new testimony before the whole committee—a session which Fulbright called his "most difficult" in 25 years—it appeared that Laird surprised at least some of the senators with a new definition of "first-strike capability." He appeared with Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms.

Emerging from the closed-door session, Laird told reporters the Soviet Union's large SS-9 missile has a "first-strike capability" because it can be used against individual "hardened"

silos of the United States missile force.

Fulbright and Gore said they had thought first-strike capability meant a "knock-out" offensive blow by an enemy.

One-Stroke Capability

The two committee members said they thought—and they felt the public thought—that Laird earlier had been saying the Soviet Union was working toward capability to wipe out all U.S. nuclear forces in one stroke.

Limiting Laird's statement to mean only a developing Soviet capability to attack individual U.S. missiles in "hardened" silos, Gore said, would mean that United States Polaris submarine missiles still would be available to respond to an attack.

Gore said the Polaris fleet possesses sufficient nuclear weapons to fire 20 at each of 50 Russian cities "and have 56 left just in case we missed one."

In other statements, Fulbright and Gore said the Foreign Relations Committee has heard no testimony from the nation's intelligence community that would support Laird's earlier statement, as they originally interpreted it.

"The case for the ABM has been severely damaged," Gore the intelligence community has



RICHARD HELMS



MELVIN R. LAIRD

said. Fulbright, in a separate statement following Laird's testimony, said he felt there now is "less justification" for an ABM system than before.

Their point was that the main argument for the ABM is that "it would protect a U.S. deterrent in a nuclear attack. If the Soviet Union is not building a force that threatens an adequate deterrent, their reasoning goes, an ABM is less necessary.

Laird, as he left the closed-door session, paused only briefly for questions. Although he held an impromptu press conference an hour later at the Pentagon, he told waiting reporters at the Capitol he was late for a meeting.

At the Pentagon, where Laird showed up in the news room, he said—as he had before leaving the Capitol—that intelligence sources do not disagree with testimony he gave the House Armed Service Committee a month ago on Soviet missile.

In this testimony, Laird said the Soviet Union is expected to have 400 SS-9 missiles operational by the mid-1970s, when multiple warheads that might then be available could greatly threaten land-based U.S. missiles.

In response to the claim that

not supported his original "first-strike capability" statement on the SS-9, Laird said it does not classify weapons in this manner.